

Brecht and the GDR: Politics, Culture, Posterity ed. by Laura Bradley and Karen Leeder (review)
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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Brecht and the GDR: Politics, Culture, Posterity (Edinburgh German Yearbook, volume 5). Edited by Laura Bradley and Karen Leeder. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011. Pp. vii + 241. Cloth \$75.00. ISBN 978-1571134929.

This book's contributors explore not only Bertolt Brecht's career in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), but, perhaps more importantly, the way his image was constructed and used by the Sozialistische Einheitspartei (SED) both before and after his death in 1956. Arguably the foremost German playwright and poet of his day, Brecht was one of several artists, exiled during the Nazi period, who chose to return to the East, where he hoped to help build a new socialist state in the wake of World War II and the Soviet occupation. Brecht, though never formally a member of any communist party, was a lifelong socialist who saw in the GDR an opportunity to realize proletarian ideals that had thus far failed to materialize in any enduring fashion in Germany. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, Brecht's initial optimism for the GDR "experiment" was quickly dimmed by frequent clashes with cultural authorities, who increasingly viewed him as a "loose cannon" due to his ongoing efforts to effect drastic changes to national theatre culture in East Germany as director of the Berliner Ensemble. After his death, Brecht's widow Helene Weigel, along with her husband's longtime collaborator Elisabeth Hauptmann and several others, continued to wrestle with SED authorities over the management of his legacy.

Bradley and Leeder have done an admirable job of organizing the essays into a comprehensive and cohesive overview of Brecht's life and legacy in East Germany. In her introduction, Bradley explains the three categories in which the volume's essays have been grouped: "Brecht in the GDR," "The Management of Brecht's Legacy," and "Creative Responses to Brecht's Work." Most of the essays are products of recent, original scholarship, though several stand out above the others. Stephen Parker's essay, which draws from previously unpublished personal correspondence between Brecht and numerous individuals, argues convincingly that the SED's persistent interference with the playwright, including public criticism and ongoing surveillance, hastened the ailing artist's demise.

Perhaps the most controversial episode in his GDR career, Brecht's response to the 17 June 1953 workers' uprising in East Berlin has long been the source of intense criticism, especially from West German politicians and intellectuals. Günter Grass, for example, believed that Brecht's note of support to Walter Ulbricht (subsequently published by the SED) represented nothing more than an attempt to preserve the latter's position at the Berliner Ensemble. Patrick Harkin argues convincingly, however, that Brecht was deeply uncomfortable with his government's handling of the uprising, but that the author muted his criticism out of fear that it would be used in the West as ammunition against the GDR socialist experiment, which he believed could still succeed, despite its inadequacies. [End Page 734]

The remaining nine essays explore other, related facets of Brecht's career and legacy, including Weigel's lengthy struggle to maintain control of the Bertolt Brecht Archive and Hauptmann's efforts, as a recognized authority "on all things Brechtian," to protect her former collaborator's works from politically minded editing and misuse (157). The last four essays demonstrate the tremendous influence Brecht's works had on subsequent artists, including singer Wolf Biermann, who was expelled from the GDR in 1976 for his ongoing criticisms of government restrictions on intellectual freedom.

This volume paints a complex picture of Brecht, one that defies simple, one-sentence explanations of the author's legacy. He was no more an uncritical, cynical toady of the SED than he was an uncompromising, valiant opponent of it. Brecht's devotion to socialist ideals led him not only to immigrate to the GDR, but also to support the SED government despite deep reservations about its policies. His fears of a possible resurgence of fascism in the West meant that he could never openly voice honest criticisms of the GDR, because doing so would provide

ammunition for...